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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1163

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000776

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/27/2017
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SUBJECT: FRENCH POLICY PLANNER SHARES VIEWS ON MIDDLE EAST

REF: 06 PARIS 7242

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Christian Nakhle, the MFA's lead policy planner for the Middle East, told us on February 27 that he just returned from a 10-day trip to the Gulf and was deeply worried about Bahrain's internal stability, saying he foresaw the possibility of serious political unrest developing within the next twelve months. On Iran, Nakhle said he was convinced that efforts were underway to marginalize Ahmadinejad, but he was unsure what to make of them. Nakhle said his Gulf interlocutors were persuaded that the U.S. and Europe will eventually cut a deal with Iran that will leave the region's Sunni residents holding the bag. End summary.

Concern over Bahrain's Stability

12. (C) Poloff met February 27 with Christian Nakhle, head of the Middle East cell at the MFA's Centre d'Analyse et de Prevision (i.e., the "CAP," the Quai's S/P equivalent). Nakhle, who just completed a 10-day trip to the Gulf states, began by voicing deep concern over Bahrain's internal stability. "The Shi'ites are playing along with the political process for now, but they want to see results and their patience is limited," he said. On the other hand, he opined that the ruling family had already "gone as far as they, or the Saudis, can go" toward opening the political system. Given the gap between Shi'a aspirations and political reality (including a palpable sense of Sunni insecurity throughout the region, which was aggravated by the fact that many Bahraini Shi'ites justified their participation in the last election in terms of a fatwa issued by Grand Ayatollah Sistani), Nakhle said he foresaw the possibility of serious political unrest developing within the next twelve months.

Open Questions About Iran's Leadership

13. (C) Turning to Iran, Nakhle said he was convinced that a "coalition" centered around Supreme Leader Khamenei, former President Rafsanjani, and former FM Ali Akbar Velayati, was in the process of marginalizing President Ahmadinejad and might even be laying the groundwork to depose him later this year. However, Nakhle confessed he was uncertain whether the anti-Ahmadinejad coalition was tactical (i.e., driven by disagreement with the Iranian President's methods) or strategic (i.e., motivated by genuine disagreement with his aims, including his avowed unwillingness to compromise on Iran's nuclear program). He expressed similar doubts about Mohammed-Bakr Qalibaf, the Mayor of Tehran. On the one hand, Nakhle saw Qalibaf as a "modern conservative" whose

traditionalism and pragmatism garnered the respect of both Khamenei and Rafsanjani, thereby making him a likely candidate to replace Ahmadinejad in the event of his impeachment. On the other hand, Nakhle questioned whether Qalibaf would retain the substance of Ahmadinejad's policies while merely changing their tone. "We are not necessarily better off with a more pragmatic hard-liner," he noted.

14. (C) In the absence of clear answers to these questions, Nakhle argued that the West must proceed cautiously so as not to miss the possibility of a deal with Tehran. "Even a tactical deal that lasts five years would be better than a strategic deal that falls apart after a few months," he opined.

Iraq: Lost to Iran

15. (C) Drawing upon his many "Track II" conversations with Gulf interlocutors in recent weeks, Nakhle delineated what he described as the prevalent Gulf (Sunni) Arab view of Iraq. According to this narrative, it is only a matter of time until the U.S. and Europe -- recognizing Iran's ability to threaten their interests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel -- are compelled to cut a deal with Tehran. "It may take a year or two, but it's inevitable," he was told. The essence of that deal (setting aside the nuclear question) will be to accept Iran's emergence as a regional power in exchange for moderate Iranian behavior. Iraq will be bifurcated, with U.S. forces withdrawing into Kurdistan while the Shi'ites dominate the south and incrementally impose their will on a "gray zone" of conflict centered around Baghdad. "The battle for Baghdad is just beginning, and it will last for at least ten or fifteen years, but the Sunnis aren't kidding themselves -- they've

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already written Iraq off as lost to Iran," said Nakhle, who seemed largely persuaded by this thesis. "The Sunnis will emerge as the losers, and will see themselves as the victims of an American-Iranian condominium," he summarized.

16. (C) Nakhle added that he was struck during his meetings in Jeddah (where he met primarily with academics and journalists) by the number of times his Saudi interlocutors asserted that they had lost "all confidence" in the United States. He said he heard a general consensus that U.S. military action against Tehran was more to be feared than a nuclear-armed Iran. "What do we care if the Iranians get the bomb? They are still Muslims, even if they are Shi'ites. Besides, if they do, we'll get one ourselves," several Saudis told him.

Mecca Accord

17. (C) Nakhle said he also heard frequent complaints that the U.S. and EU had not done more to welcome the Mecca Accord, which was touted both as a means of avoiding a Palestinian civil war and of locking Hamas into a position where it would be obliged to make additional compromises over time. "You are dynamiting the unity government! You expect Hamas to evolve in 12 months toward a position that it took the PLO 30 years to reach," said one accuser. Though sympathetic to that argument (Nakhle, like most of our Quai contacts, shares President Chirac's fervent conviction that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains at the heart of the region's troubles), Nakhle tended to view the accord as the beginning of a Saudi-Egyptian effort to woo Syrian President Asad away from Iran and bring him back into the Arab fold.

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